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The Dividends of Democracy

Inam ul Haq^{*}

Let me begin with the oft-repeated statement that the worst kind of democracy is better than the most benign dictatorial rule. No one in the right frame of mind can disagree with this assertion. However, in order to comprehend the system of democracy, one has to dig deep into its intent, purpose and essence. Democracy defined in its simplest form means, Government of the people, for the people, and by the people. This definition implies that people are the major stakeholders in decision making and all issues of national importance are decided in accordance with their wishes and aspirations. People send their representatives to the Parliament where they are truly represented without any bias or prejudice or personal considerations. While the parliamentarians are expected to reinforce their party line or ideology, they are under oath not to follow their party dictates which are either against the national interests or flout the basic essence of the constitution. Parliament is a supreme institution which is sovereign and creates congenial environment for the Government to run its business. This places on the Parliament a huge responsibility of keeping the Government on its right course, extending help where necessary and checkmating any policy that could adversely impact on national interests. The representatives, therefore, are supposed to be honest, selfless and true custodians of national interests. They owe allegiance to the State and not to their respective Party high command, and must therefore consider themselves bound by their conscience to contribute in the best interest of the nation. Parliament under a dictator is

^{*} Inam-ul-Haq is a retired Brigadier and a frequent contributor to the journal.
Email: briginamulhaq@yahoo.com

nothing more than a rubber stamp whereas Parliament in democracy can not, and should not, allow the government to bulldoze its way through. It must be strong to resist any legislation that is detrimental to the national interests or is in conflict with the constitution. Presumably this is the true spirit and essence of democracy. It sounds bizarre and even comical when high profile government officials make vain efforts to justify their acts by quoting similar examples from the autocratic regimes. There can be no comparisons or parallels of the two systems.

Democratic dispensation requires that all parties should be taken on board but is by no means intended to lure the allies through appeasement such as giving cabinet slots and thereby incurring huge financial costs to the national exchequer. A country with a ragtag economy and holding a begging bowl ought to make deliberate efforts to drastically cut down its non-developmental and avoidable expenditures. It may be underscored that a country can maintain its sovereignty only by reducing its dependence on foreign assistance. The lesser the dependence, the greater the sovereignty.

A sovereign Parliament by virtue of its collective decisions provides strength to the Government and enables it to deal with foreign powers from a position of strength. A dictator since he has no roots in his own masses always requires the blessings of foreign powers to perpetuate his rule. Being fragile, he is always prone to surrender the national interests. He does not have the backing of the people and depends solely on foreign support. He has no choice but to pursue the interests of foreign powers. He is indeed a puppet and can be moulded and remoulded to facilitate foreign agenda. The examples of Gen Zia ul Haq and Gen Pervez Musharraf are reflective of the myopic and faulty policies, which have brought the nation to the horns of dilemma.

Whereas the former sowed the seeds of militancy, the latter deliberately allowed it to grow; ironically, both presented a false myth of indispensability and connived with US to extend their regimes.

Results of their decisions are obvious. The country is in the grip of radical elements with fear and insecurity pervading all over. Our neighbours look at us with suspicion and even friendly countries like China and Iran have voiced concerns. There is a serious trust deficit between us and the US; American administration suspecting that we double crossed them, and people of Pakistan complaining that we have been brought to this sorry impasse by blindly following the American game plan in the region. All this happened in the absence of sovereign Parliaments or more precisely in the presence of rubber stamp' Parliaments. Is this not enough to wake (shake) us up from deep slumber and realize that the well being of our nation resides in a sovereign Parliament where every elected member should have the integrity, courage and prudence to raise voice in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of the people of Pakistan and purely in keeping with our national interest. A Parliament where there is no point scoring, no political expediencies and where party interests do not override the national interests. A Parliament wherein the members show their allegiance to the country instead of their leaders. A Parliament whose members have the spine to disagree with their Party leaders, if and when they feel that their leaders are lacking in vision, foresight or sincerity to promote national interests. This is how the Parliament should look like.

Unfortunately, the true essence of democracy has always been overlooked. The party elected to power mistakenly believe that it has been given the carte blanche to do as it feels like without taking the Parliament on board on issues of national significance. Ironically, every

government loses its popularity within one or two years of its rule and when it sees the writing on the wall, its functionaries get involved in massive corruption and shady deals to make fortunes so that they can live in style even when not in power.

One can easily gauge the extent of sovereignty of our Parliament in light of the Kerry Lugar Bill and NRO. Kerry Lugar Bill was projected as a major triumph of the Government without even taking the stakeholders into confidence. While doing so, the Parliament was bypassed and even when forced, the Government gave only a cosmetic treatment to the bill; only a few speeches and no voting on the bill which in all probability would have been rejected in its present shape. As far as the NRO is concerned, there is no precedence in the entire world of such an ordinance having been passed by any Parliament. Needless to mention that if passed, this Ordinance shall put a permanent stigma on the wisdom, integrity and sovereignty of the Parliament and embolden the present and future leadership of this country to loot and plunder the nation without any fear or reprisal.

A lot is being said against the illegal takeovers by the military hierarchy and rightly so but unfortunately, sad as it is, the rubber stamp parliaments gave them indemnity. This is the sole reason, which encouraged General Pervez Musharraf to get into the misadventure. Luckily for Pakistan, he could not get indemnity, which makes him a fit case for trial under Article 6 of the Constitution. The present Parliament, which calls itself sovereign, must move against him to prove that it is serious in stemming the menace of illegal take-overs once and for all. So far the Parliament has not shown any resolve to do so which brings one to the conclusion that politicians indulge only in rhetorics and do not seriously mean what they say. Since the onus in this case is on the

Government, it must pass the test by initiating proceedings against the dictator.

The dividends of democracy are long enduring. The effects of measures taken may not be visible in the short term but they do have a lasting impact on the state of governance and all other facets of national life. Conversely, all acts of dictatorial regimes are myopic and short sighted, and do not take into account the consequences that a particular decision might have on nation's well being and prosperity in the longer run. Gen Zia's decision at the time of waging the so-called Jihad against the Russians was unilateral and based on short sightedness, emotionalism and expediency. Little did he realize that he was cultivating a radical environment that would become uncontrollable menace in times to come. Even then some political voices particularly of ANP that forewarned Pakistan of staying away from the power struggle of the two super powers were overlooked. The warning was clear and unambiguous that the battleground in Afghanistan would ultimately spill over into FATA and NWFP, and cause the flames to spread over to all parts of the country. Had there been democracy in the country, the Parliament would have most definitely foreseen the possible consequences of dragging ourselves into this needless Jihad, and stayed away. The Government at that time took pride in precipitating the break up of USSR; again a myopic feeling considering that the existence of the two super powers ensured a power equation that kept a tight check on unilateral misadventures. How does the world look like now? A helpless comity of nations, kneeling down in front of a roaring lion in absolute rage, praying for mercy in order to escape its wrath. Now that we have the knowledge and experience of hindsight, we realize that fighting the Russians in Afghanistan was a blunder the consequences of which we will have to

reap for considerably long time. As if that was not enough, another dictator in his wisdom (indeed total lack of it) decided on his own to fight America's proxy war once again in Afghanistan. This was a much bigger blunder than that of Zia because by now we were aware of the growing state of radicalism in Pakistan besides knowing full well the US intentions and reliability as a friendly state. The adverse domino effects of wrong policies are clearly visible. The entire country is burning and its image tarnished internationally. The economy has come to a standstill; foreign investments have dwindled and educational institutions have been shut down. The entire country is a hostage to the militants. All this is due to the faulty policies of autocratic regimes where only one man called the shots and did not consider the Parliaments worthy of consultation and decision making. Wise nations learn from their mistakes and make conscientious efforts not to repeat them. The question that should agitate our minds is whether we have learnt lessons from our past. Have we now shifted the onus of decision making to our Parliament? Is it sovereign enough and does (can) it take decisions as per the wishes and aspirations of the people! Do we have a parliamentary form of Government with powers vested in the Prime Minister? It needs no brains to determine the true state of affairs.

The Kerry Lugar Bill, notwithstanding its positive or negative impact, became a sore issue simply because it was not debated in the Parliament. A timely debate on its conditionalities could have saved the Government, and indeed the country, from embarrassment. Democracy ensures transparency but the talk of Black Water and Dyncorp etc doing rounds are shrouded in mystery which has given rise to too many rumors and misinformation causing uncertainty and frustration amongst the people.

Democracy encourages debate and enables the Government to formulate national aims and objectives which form the basis of sound domestic as well as foreign policy goals. The Government must make visible efforts to achieve consensus on both. The ongoing military operation is progressing well but is clearly devoid of political objectives. Needless to mention that while the military effort would succeed, albeit at heavy costs, the end result could well be a vacuum with militants regaining space in the absence of clearly defined political objectives. This calls for a deliberate debate inside as well as outside the Parliament to formulate Political objectives and accordingly take post operation steps and socio-economic measures to restore peace and normalcy in the Country. Creating enabling environment of consensus is the hall mark of democracy which must be promoted to reap its benefits.

The Parliament must be allowed to deliberate on the causes of growing radicalism in the country. The issue of madrassahs must be handled with great care and caution. These seminaries must be so brought under scrutiny and control that the actions do not force a backlash from the conservative religious elements. Their functioning must be facilitated and guided to ensure teachings based on Islamic values of tolerance, moderation and acquisition of knowledge and degrees that can secure them decent jobs in society. I am sanguine that thorough debate in the Parliament shall help identify the specific areas on which the Government can and must focus to redress the underlying causes of mushrooming of madrassahs. Poverty, unemployment, lack of basic facilities such as education and health etc could then be provided to stem the degree and extent of frustration among the youth and reduce the dependence and compulsion of parents sending their sons / wards to madrassahs. It may however, be understood that a large majority of these

seminaries are doing a good job by providing food, shelter and education to the deprived segments of society. It may also be appreciated that these madrassahs have engaged the youth who would have otherwise got embroiled in crimes such as thefts, dacoities, robberies, murders and drug addiction etc besides falling prey to the anti-state elements for petty gains. It would, therefore, be safe to suggest that instead of launching a drive against them (a counter productive exercise indeed); they must be dovetailed into the main stream education centres to ensure their subsequent employment in public as well as private sectors.

An agro-based country which relies on import of agricultural goods can hardly be called an agricultural country. This does call for serious thinking by the Parliament to promote agriculture to ensure self sufficiency. Incentives to the growers in the form of increasing returns, provision of subsidies, uninterrupted power and water supply and procurement of goods from the farms by the government must be worked out in detail by the Parliament.

The foregoing analysis lead us to the following lessons: -

- Democracy must be allowed to function in its true form and essence.
- Parliamentary form of government must be restored in its true shape.
- Sovereignty of Parliament must be ensured. All national issues must be debated in the Parliament and Parliamentarians encouraged to give their honest opinion irrespective of their party affiliations. Vesting powers of decision making in the Party High Command accompanies more with autocracy than democracy.

- 1973 Constitution must be restored and all amendments made thereafter must be debated in the Parliament and all its negative provisions removed.
- The policy of undue appeasement of small parties to keep the alliance intact at all costs must be curbed. It may be appreciated that Pakistan can illafford the fat size of cabinets and frequent foreign tours with large entourages.
- Government has done well to reach consensus on NFC award on the basis of multiple factors. The Provincial governments must also carry out similar exercise for equitable distribution of resources to the under developed / deprived areas. Massive reconstruction / rehabilitation works must also be undertaken in FATA immediately after the military operations.
- Parliament must be brought on board on every issue including foreign deals to curbs rumours / misinformation.
- Standing Committee on agriculture must be tasked to devise ways and means to encourage farmers for achieving self-sufficiency in agricultural products. The recommendations so formulated must then be debated in the two houses to evolve a sound strategy. Other issues related to power generation and enhanced industrial output must also be debated in the two houses for meaningful input and implementation.
- A reform package must be worked out for madrassahs in due consultation with the stakeholders by a special committee deputed for the purpose, and thoroughly debated in the Parliament.
- A sovereign Parliament shall most certainly restore the credibility of the Government which would then be in a position

to motivate convince overseas Pakistanis to invest in Pakistan without any fear of losing their hard earned income thereby substantially reducing our dependence on foreign aid packages.

The aforementioned raises a trillion dollar question whether we have a truly democratic system with a sovereign Parliament in place? Do we have a system in which the institutions are stronger than the leaders; a Parliament whose members have the gumption to take stand on national issues according to their conscience regardless of any gains or victimisation; a Parliament which is always engaged in serious, productive and meaningful Legislative business; a Government which is transparent, strong and efficient, and considers itself bound, committed and accountable to the nation for every step that it takes (or does not take). Does our system ensure a truly Parliamentary form of government with powers vested in the Prime Minister who takes the Parliament into confidence before taking major policy decisions? Has our Parliament been given an opportunity to seriously ponder on how to improve our economy to throw away the begging bowl once and for all? Has our Government involved the Parliament into evolving sound, education (the one announced recently was nothing more than mere semantics and grandiosity), industrial, power generation and agricultural polities. Ours is a nation of 170 million people who are no longer as simple as they used to be. The strong and powerful media has given them so much of awareness and acumen that they can no longer be driven by rhetoric and false promises. Nothing short of exceptional performance and good governance can satisfy them. So time to gear up and perform / deliver.

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